

Joshua 7

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Date: 15 December 2019

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[0 : 00] If you would like to grab your Bibles again and turn to Joshua chapter 7. With Christmas fast approaching, a lot of things are winding down towards the end of the year.

Schools have their Christmas parties, all those midweek activities take a break, the election is finally over and we're preparing for a Christmas where we can put our feet up, have a mug of hot chocolate or a glass of mulled wine, enjoy the lights, the Christmas markets and the Christmas films and over the next couple of weeks the festivities will continue until Hogmanay and into the new year. But from past experience we know that soon after we'll be hit by those January blues.

When school starts again, when we're back to work, when the tree is taken down and put away or thrown in the tip and when you've already broken your new year resolutions 78 times and it's only the 6th of January. Well here in Joshua chapter 7 the festivities and celebrations are over and Israel has hit the January blues hard. In the first six chapters of Joshua things are going perfectly, they have entered the land, they've just had a miraculous victory over the stronghold that was the city of Jericho, but here in chapter 7 things go wrong. The chapter even begins with the word but, letting us know straight away that things are about to turn. The shouts in response to the trumpets have, sorry, the shouts in response to the trumpets that saw the walls tumbling down have turned into shouts and cries of despair before the Lord. The celebration of an astonishing victory is over and it is replaced with the crushing consequences of a humiliating defeat.

In fact, this is the only defeat recorded in the conquest of Canaan and serves a purpose for those at the time, for the original reader and for us today. And we're going to look at this in two parts before looking at how it impacts us today. So three what's. Firstly, what went wrong? Then what happened to put it right? And finally we'll close by asking what it means for us. So firstly, what went wrong?

After destroying Jericho and most that was in it, Joshua leads Israel to the next city in their conquest of the land. The city of Ai is the target. And with the same procedure as with Jericho, Joshua sends a few spies into Ai. They return very confident. They have spied out the city. They have seen that it doesn't have many people and they do not think it's worthwhile for all the people of Israel to go up.

So instead of sending all the men up, they recommend that only about two or three thousand should go. And so three thousand were sent. Israel was thinking victory was sure. A real David versus Goliath moment centuries before David and Goliath were even born. And shockingly, just like David and Goliath, the underdog won. The three thousand men of Israel fled before the people of Ai. They were chased down and thirty-six of the men of Israel were killed. An absolute disaster. The nation that defeated this incredible fortified city were now humiliated by this tiny settlement, this tiny city that they didn't even recognize as a threat. And the result, we read in verse five, is that the hearts of the people melted and became as water. That's the third time in the book of Joshua this phrase is used, except in the first two times it was the heart of the Canaanites that melted and returned to water.

[4 : 01] The Israelites have become as those they were to drive out of the land. They have now shared in the experience of their enemies. That experience of their enemies has now been shifted to them.

In five verses, the unbroken success, the 100% winning streak is over. It has been overturned. And what we have here in these verses is an underdog story. And with every underdog story, the reason why the favourites lost is that they become complacent. They become arrogant. They become cocky. Apollo Creed didn't take the amateur Rocky Balboa as a serious threat. Premier League giants throwing in a reserve player or two in their teams, getting embarrassed by the minnows in the FA Cup.

Even Goliath laughed at David and his God. And it's been argued here that this is the reason for Israel's defeats, that they became complacent, that they've just had this miraculous victory over Jericho and they've become cocky. We destroy Jericho with ease. What chance does Ai have? They sent spies as in Jericho, but they didn't seek God's guidance as before. They didn't send in all the people, which is an important theme in the book of Joshua. And a lot has been written about these military tactics, but it isn't naive or complacent military tactics that have caused defeat, that led to these 36 men losing their lives. Because in verse 1, we are told exactly why this defeat happened.

Joshua, he doesn't find out until verse 11, but the reader, we know from verse 1. The defeat happened because Israel broke faith regarding the devoted things. In chapter 6, just before the walls of Jericho came crashing down, Joshua gives the commands, echoing what has already been told in Deuteronomy. The city of Jericho and all that is in it is to be devoted to the Lord for destruction.

[6 : 04] It was normal for a victorious party to take the spoils in such a conquest, but here all the spoils were to be devoted, to be set apart for the Lord as the first fruits of the conquest. So if you want to cast your eyes back a page and look with me at verse 18 of chapter 6. Chapter 6, verse 18.

But you keep yourselves from the things devoted to destruction, lest when you have devoted them, you take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel a thing for destruction and bring trouble upon it. And yet that is exactly what happened. Achan, son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, son of Judah, disobeyed this command, breaking the covenant and took some of the devoted things. But look at the way it's phrased in verse 1. Verse 1 is bookended by the people of Israel.

The people of Israel broke faith. The anger of the Lord burned against the people of Israel. This one-man sin, Achan's sin, has affected the entire nation, the entire community of Israel.

In recent months, there has been real emphasis on each person's decisions making a real impact to the world around us. Political parties are saying that your vote matters, that your single vote could be the difference for the future of this country. Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion are saying that the lifestyle of each one of us has affected and created climate change. And what we see here is that the sins of an individual affect the entire community of God's people. That my sins, our sins, affect the whole church. And those sins result in the anger of the Lord. This chapter begins with the righteous anger of the Lord against the sin of his people. And the resolution of God's righteous anger ends the chapter. Now we can point the finger at Joshua and his warfare tactics as the reason why Israel lost, why they were defeated by Ai, but that's not what the text does. No, the reason that God's anger was burning against his people is because of the sin of Achan. Joshua discovers this from the

Lord, in verse 11, Israel has sinned. They have transgressed my covenant that I commanded them. They have taken some of the devoted things. They have stolen and lied and put them among their belongings. And when we glance down to verse 21, we complete the picture as we hear Achan's account.

[8 : 44] When I saw among the spoil a beautiful cloak from Shinar and 200 shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing 50 shekels, then I coveted them and took them. Now it is unlikely that Achan knew the damage that his actions would cause. That in a whole city of spoil, surely no one would notice a cloak, some coins and a gold bar. But when does anyone fully realize the damage that their sins could cause?

Look at what Achan says again in verse 21. I saw, I coveted and I took. And that should be ringing alarm bells in our heads because we've seen this pattern before. It's a pattern of Eve in Genesis 3. So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. And she also gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate. Like ourselves, like Achan, Eve couldn't have imagined the devastation of her seeing, coveting and taking would cause. For her it was just a piece of fruit, but it has been disastrous for every single person, since and intolerable to God. So what were the consequences for Achan's sins? Well, the consequences were for the whole of Israel. In verse 12, they cannot stand against enemies.

They've already lost 36 men in battle. They become devoted for destruction. They take the place of the spoil and become set apart for destruction. And more importantly, God will be with them no more.

This is a reverse of the declaration that God made to Joshua at the beginning of his leadership, when God said, do not be afraid and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. One man's sin has led to 36 men losing their lives. It has led to a humiliating defeat that would affect future battles, and it has completely jeopardized the relationship between God and his people.

From God bringing them into the promised land, to his anger burning against them. From God being with his people through the wilderness, across the Jordan and into Jericho and through Jericho, to saying that he will be with them no more. So what went wrong? Well, disobedience. Disobedience to God's covenant.

[11 : 22] Sin against God is what went wrong. But we know that God's anger was turned away from his people. So what happened to put it right? Secondly, what happened to put it right? Well, Joshua went to the Lord in prayer by falling on his face before the ark in verses 6 to 9. Joshua's first reaction to the defeat is to turn to the Lord. When there are no evident answers. In his confusion, Joshua turns to God. And Joshua questions the Lord and his promises, even asks what the Lord will do for his great name. And in his grace, God answers Joshua. See, God has not changed. God has not let them down. God has not gone against his word, and he has not broke his promises. Instead, he reveals to Joshua the truth about the hidden sin in the camp. Yes, it is about Joshua coming to the Lord that begins this resolution. But the real turning point is at the end of verse 12. Unless you destroy the devoted things among you.

So what happened to put it right, to make it right? Ultimately, it is that the Lord in his grace and mercy made a way for his people to come back to him. To search out the guilty party, God commands that Israel consecrate themselves and instructs the process of bringing the entirety of Israel, the whole nation to Joshua, tribe by tribe and family by family and finally man by man. Joshua obeys and this process finally leads to Achan being found out with Joshua saying to him, give glory to the Lord God of Israel and give praise to the Lord God of Israel. And you may see in your footnotes that that word praise can be read and translated as confess. And Achan does confess. He does confess that he sinned against the Lord God of Israel. In this passage, we do see repentance, but it is not Achan's repentance. In the process, he had multiple times to confess and repent as he saw the search narrowing in around him. But he didn't.

This isn't a heartfelt repentance, but a declaration of guilt. No, the repentance in this chapter is seen in Joshua and the people of Israel as they obey the commands that God issued in consecrating themselves and ridding the camp of the things devoted to destruction. So after discovering the devoted things, they take Achan, his children, his possessions, his livestock, and the devoted things out into the valley of Achor, stone them, set them on fire as the spoil of Jericho was. And this jars of us, doesn't it?

It seems incredibly harsh that even though it was Achan who sinned, his family also experienced the judgment for this sin. And we question, how is this fair? How is this just? Well, a quick Google search will show that many have speculated that it is because his family obviously would have noticed the spoil buried beneath their tent. But that's not what the text says. Look again at verse 15. He who is taken with the devoted things shall be burned with fire, he and all that he has, because he has transgressed the covenant of the Lord and because he has done an outrageous thing in Israel. This judgment and the scale of this judgment is because of how serious sin is, how serious breaking the covenant is. And this seems harsh with us because we do not have the same view of sin as God does. When it comes to sin, we hide it, we downplay it, we justify it, or try to, but we do not take sin as seriously as we should. On the human level, Achan just stole a coat and some precious metal, and it led to him, his family, and all his possessions being destroyed.

[15 : 33] But the full picture is that he has sinned against God. He stole from God, and he is experiencing the perfect and just judgment that he deserves. The people of Israel needed to be cleansed from the sin that meant that God in his holiness could not be with his people. Only then was the anger of the Lord satisfied. Only then was the relationship restored and the conquest resumed. The chapter closes with the statement of that the valley is named Achor, meaning trouble. This serves as a warning, an example for the readers, for those who are living in the land, and it's to be taken in contrast with what has gone before. In the first six chapters, they have shown exactly what to do, to trust in God, to follow him and to keep his covenant, and everything went well. But here in chapter seven is a stark warning.

When they obeyed God, they experienced victory over their enemies and have prospered, as seen in Jericho. But when they break the covenant, when they sin against God, then they not only throw away blessings, but invite curses and judgment. And notice that this is a warning for everyone. Achan was not a pagan on the outside. He was one of God's people. He was in the covenant community. He was from the tribe of Judah. But he sinned against God, and that sin needed to be dealt with justly.

And there's a helpful parallel with another character that we see in Joshua, in the person of Rahab. So Achan, he was an Israelite who experienced firsthand the benefits of being in covenant with God.

He fails to obey God, and he and all who belong to him are destroyed. Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute, hears of what the Lord has done and fears him.

[17:28] And although everything and everyone else in Jericho is destroyed, her and her family alone are saved, becoming part of the covenant people. The original readers in the land need to know that God cares more about obedience than their heritage. It doesn't matter who you can trace your ancestry back to, but it matters how you are living in relation to the living God.

So that is what happened, to put it right, but what does it mean for us? Finally, what does it mean for us? Well, this passage also serves as a warning, not only for the original reader, but for us today.

But it also leaves us with wonderful hope. And let me just draw out three things that we learn about sin in this chapter. Firstly, sin is never concealed. Sin is never concealed because God is all seen. Achan thought that burying the spoils would be enough, that nobody would know, but God knew. Nothing is hidden from God. In the New Testament, we see a similar story in the book of Acts, chapter 5, with Ananias and Sapphira, who lie about the money, the amount of money they're giving to the church, and they kept some back for themselves. But God knew, and they were struck dead. They were able to deceive some, but they were not able to deceive God, and were punished justly. And we need to be careful here. The accounts of Achan and Ananias and Sapphira are not there to tell us that if we sin, we can expect to be struck down. That's not what they're doing. Because if it was, then which one of us would be able to avoid that?

[19:11] Nor are these an act of warning for the Christian who is fighting against temptation and repenting when they give in to it, repenting when they sin. No, this is not for the person who is battling sin.

This is a warning for the person who thinks they can get away with it. The story of Achan is a fulfillment of the promise God made in Deuteronomy, chapter 29, verses 18 and 21.

I'll just read it out. Beware, lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit. One who, when he hears the word of the sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.

This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike. The Lord will not be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the Lord and his jealousy will smoke against that man. And the curses written in this book will settle upon him, and the Lord will blot out his name from under heaven.

And the Lord will single him out from all the tribes of Israel for calamity, in accordance with all the curses of the covenant written in this book of law. Achan thought he could get away with it.

[20:23] This is a warning for those who are complacent and presumptuous with sin. Those who do not see it as an issue, those who presume that they will get away with it.

What this passage tells us is that God knows that sin. That hidden sin will be brought to the light, and that sin will have real consequences in this world.

The question is, what is our attitude to sin this evening? Are we battling against it, or sweeping it under the rug? Are we confessing it, or are we concealing it?

Because we can keep trying to conceal it, but sooner or later, it will come into the open, and have real consequences. Sin is never concealed.

Not only is sin never concealed, but secondly, sin is never contained. Sin is never contained. It affects the whole community. Achan's sin led to the whole nation being guilty in the eyes of the Lord.

[21:24] No man is an island. No person is totally independent. And that's an attitude of our time that we need to challenge. The things that I do, the things that you do, affects those around us.

The sins of one person can and does affect the whole church. And this affects how we function as a church. Just as Israel are to cleanse themselves from the things devoted to destruction, the New Testament church is commanded to do the same.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 5, Paul says, For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside.

Purge the evil person from among you. This is why church discipline is necessary. To protect the local church. To protect the bride of Christ.

And this is part of the responsibility of the elders. And it's not an easy thing to do. So be praying for your elders as they strive to guard Bonacord Free Church.

[22 : 29] Pray for God-given wisdom and discernment for them in matters of discipline in the church. But there's also not only a challenge for the elders to be in guard, but personally as well.

Guard and think about how our sins, our own sins, may affect the church. We may not mean to do it, but it is the biggest threat to the church in this country.

It's not from the outside, but from within. Nationally, look at the pain caused in churches by established denominations, turning from the word of God. And in the local church, it's usually the issues from within that cause the most threatening tensions.

It's how the devil wants to get a foothold in his attempts to destroy the church. And also notice that the enemy strikes when the church is at crucial points. It was at the beginning of the conquest of the promised land that Achan brought disaster for Israel.

Ananias and Sapphira deceived the church just as it was being established. Satan will strike at crucial points in the life of the church.

[23 : 43] And I think it's fair to say that here at Bonacord Free Church, you're coming up to a crucial point as you look to appoint a new minister. So brothers and sisters, be on guard.

Be on guard as the enemy will be seeing this as a prime opportunity to attack. Be on guard. But also know that nothing, absolutely nothing, will destroy the precious church of Christ.

Jesus has guaranteed the victory. He will present his bride cleansed. He did so when he died on the cross. And he will return to finally defeat this enemy and deliver his people into his kingdom. And that leads us on to our final point. Sin is never concealed. It is never contained. And sin is never taken lightly.

Thirdly, sin is never taken lightly. But Jesus has paid the cost. God's view and tolerance of sin has not changed.

[24 : 49] What we read of Achan and his family, especially when we find it harsh, but that is because we do not take sin seriously and we do not view it as God views it.

As Christians, we see how serious God takes sin when we look at the cross of Christ. That the issue of sin is so great that it took God to send his son to a broken world.

That he had to live life that we cannot and have not. That although he knew no sin, he became sin for us and experienced the full wrath of God on the cross.

So that we may become the righteousness of God. All of us are guilty of sinning against God. All of us are deserving of his burning anger.

But yet he has provided a way for us to not only be delivered from this anger, but to be made his people. Knowing that God is with us. Are you spared from the anger of God?

[25 : 57] Well, it is not by membership of a church that we are spared. It is not by doing good deeds that we are spared. It is not by anything else that we are spared, but only by finding refuge in our Lord Jesus Christ, who has taken away the anger of the Lord from his bride by his obedience and his death.

So this Christmas, as we remember the incarnation of the Lord Jesus, let's not just leave him in the manger, but let's praise him for his perfect life, his substitutionary death, his victorious resurrection, and the promises he has for the church.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, you're good, and you're holy, and you're wonderful, Lord. And we thank you for your word.

Lord, we realize that there are parts of your word that are difficult, that jar with us. Lord, but we thank you that your word reveals to us your character. Father, your word reveals to us how you are unchanging, and how you are perfect in all of your ways.

Father, we pray that you would be helping us to have a better view of sin. Lord, that we would be striving to have our hearts match yours, that we would be viewing sin the same way that you view it,

that we would find it as detestable as you do.

[27 : 24] Lord, and that would change how we live, that we wouldn't try to justify it, try to hide it, that we wouldn't be okay with it, Lord, but we would be constantly battling against temptation, battling against sin, that we would be slaying it and putting it to death.

But Lord, we realize that we will mess up. We realize that we won't get it right, Lord, but we thank you that we do have this wonderful Savior in Christ. Lord, be reminding us of our security in him. Be reminding us of what he has done to deal with this issue of sin. And Lord, be continually making us more like him by your spirit. Father, we pray for this church.

We pray for the future of this church, Lord, and we pray that you will be protecting it, that you would be helping the elders and the members here to be on guard, that you would be protecting them against the enemy, helping them to rest in the promises of Christ and to be finding themselves constantly in your word.

And Lord, we pray for David and for Martha, Lord, as they come to the end of their tenure. Lord, we pray that you would have your hand over them as they move on to this next chapter, but also that you would have your hand over this church in bringing in a replacement.

[28 : 49] Lord, we commit this church to you and we trust that this church will be glorifying you for many years to come until Christ returns here in Aberdeen and across the world.

We pray this in your son's holy and precious name. Amen. Amen.